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Like the Notorious B.I.G. said in "Juicy," the last really great hip-hop song: "It was all a dream." In that song, Biggie Smalls told the story of the impossibility of all he had achieved given the conditions he had had to overcome. I haven't had quite the experiences or the achievements of Biggie Smalls, but I am the first to acknowledge that I would never have achieved anything at all without the support of the many people along the way. My committee greatly assisted in the early development and completion of this project in its incarnation as a dissertation. Sunn Shelley Wong provided a model for scholarly and pedagogical integrity. The project could not have been completed without her tireless support and understanding at every stage. Hortense Spillers repeatedly provided critical challenges to my ideas that forced me to reconceptualize, refine, and hone my arguments. Timothy Murray offered an invaluable critical perspective on race and visual culture. Karlton Hester not only helped me to have a fuller understanding of the cultural and aesthetic production of music but he also introduced me to jazz, which became a lifelong love and probably the single most important thing that I have gained from my education. I have had the benefit of great teachers and mentors throughout my education. Salah Hassan, Ann Cvetkovich, Rajeswari Mohan, Joyce Miller, Dawit Woldu, and Helena Woodard have been models of excellence in teaching and mentoring.

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Spectacular Blackness

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Cotton Comes to Harlem

AN INTRODUCTION

March against Fear The Civil Rights Movement and the Birth of Black Power

In 1966 James Meredith, a nonviolence advocate, a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement, and the first African American to graduate from the University of Mississippi, began a symbolic walk across the state of Mississippi that he called "The March against Fear."[1] Meredith hoped that his act would "tear down the fear that grips the Negroes in Mississippi," but the march ended abruptly when on the second day, he was shot by a sniper and so severely injured that he was unable to continue. Like the King assassination that was to come later, the attack on James Meredith seemed to many African Americans to point to the ultimate futility of nonviolent resistance as a direct-action tactic against racism and fear. The Civil Rights Movement responded to the attack on James Meredith by sending representatives from the mainstream civil rights organizations to finish the March against Fear, including Martin Luther King Jr. from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks from the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In film footage of the march, King can be seen to be physically holding Carmichael back from responding to police and anti–civil rights protesters.[2] When the march arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael was arrested for trespassing on public property, and when he was released later that evening, he galva-

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nized the audience that gathered with calls for "Black Power"—a call that Ricks had first uttered that evening—rather than the chant of "Freedom Now" that was customary for the Civil Rights Movement.

The notion of Black Power galvanized those within the Civil Rights Movement who perceived it to be stagnating behind the radical legislative change the movement had provoked. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 barred discrimination in public accommodations, education, and employment, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 ended discriminatory practices in relation to voting. On 10 December 1964, Martin Luther King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but neither legislative acts nor public accolades seemed to assure the freedom that the Civil Rights Movement—originally called the Freedom Movement—had promised. King began to plan the "Poor People's March" at least partly in response to those in the Civil Rights Movement, epitomized by Ricks and Carmichael, who wanted to create a vision of the civil rights struggle beyond legislative and court gains. King's assassination on 4 April 1968, the day after he delivered his iconic "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speech in support of a garbage workers strike, caused widespread urban rioting and was widely grieved.

Black Power, an idea conceptually diffuse enough to be claimed by Black capitalists as well as Black communists, revolved around the notion of economic independence and cultural self-determination.[3] Carmichael and Ricks declared the need for "Black Power" on 16 June 1966, and by October of the same year, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton responded by founding the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. That same month, in the context of widespread campus unrest, James Garrett founded the first Black Student Union, at San Francisco State University, paving the way for the establishment of a black studies program the next year. According to the historian Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar in *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, "by 1967, most major universities and colleges formed Black Student Unions and Black Student Associations" (136). While the Civil Rights Movement had argued for inclusion in educational institutions, the Black Student Union movement insisted on defining the parameters for that inclusion.

In the political arena, the Nation of Islam, which had been founded in the 1930s, experienced a meteoric rise in membership throughout the late 1950s and into the 1960s, so much so that at the death of its founder, Elijah Muhammad, in 1975, it was the wealthiest African American organization in U.S. history.[4] Increasing attention to the Black Power movement in pop-

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ular culture and the news media bolstered existing groups and created new ones. For example, membership in the Nation of Islam doubled after Minister Malcolm X appeared on a Mike Wallace CBS special on the "Black Muslim movement" entitled *The Hate that Hate Produced* in 1959. Though Black nationalism could claim a history in the United States dating back to the 1700s, membership in new radical Black nationalist groups such as the US Organization, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and the Republic of New Afrika skyrocketed.

In *The Black Power Movement*, Peniel E. Joseph warns against seeing the rise of Black Power as the death of the Civil Rights Movement and views it instead "as an alternative to the ineffectiveness of civil rights demands in critical areas of American life" (3). A perspective that regards Black Power as having "simultaneously triggered the demise of civil rights and the New Left's descent into destructive 'revolutionary' violence" not only severely limits the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement and African American radicalism, as Joseph claims, it also disables possibilities for seeing African American culture of the 1960s and 1970s in relation to an understanding of culture as "a noun of process," as Raymond Williams has declared in *Keywords* (3, 87).

Chester Himes and the Question of Culture

In *Black Power* Stokely Carmichael asserts: "It is absolutely essential that black people develop an awareness of their cultural heritage. . . . And they will soon learn that the Hollywood image of man-eating cannibals waiting for, and waiting on, the Great White Hunter is a lie" (38–37). Three years later, in 1970, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios released *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, a film adaptation of Chester Himes's popular Coffin Ed and Grave Digger Jones series of detective novels from the 1950s and 1960s. Set in Harlem, the film's intricate plot revolves around the exploits of a colorful messianic religious leader, two equally colorful African American Harlem detectives, Harlem's criminal underworld, and a lost bale of cotton. Generally regarded by film historians as either the first film in the Black film explosion of the late 1960s and 1970s that spawned the genre of Blaxploitation or an important precursor of it, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* is high on "local color" and documents the intricacies of lower-class African American urban life.[5] Drawing on Himes's vividly absurdist portraits of ghetto life, the film both created and recycled a canon of visual images that would

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come to define the contours of African American life in U.S. popular culture for decades to come.

In an essay in *The Wretched of the Earth* entitled "On National Culture," Frantz Fanon speaks of the "impossible contradictions" inherent in the assertion of a culture of liberation in the midst of political struggle for liberation (237). Himes's work for major Hollywood studios and as a fiction writer epitomizes the "impossible contradictions" that came to characterize the uneven embrace of Black Power culture in the 1960s and 1970s. He never achieved the financial success or artistic legitimacy he sought in his lifetime, though he would be courted by both major publishers and Hollywood studios. Like Black Power culture in general, Himes's work formed the unacknowledged contours for contemporary understandings of racial exchange and conflict and perceptions of African American culture and cultural production. Chester Himes not only provided an important catalyst for the Black Power–era cultural revolution when he created the African American urban underclass in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* as the prototype for African American authenticity, but, in shifting from the literary metaphors of protest fiction to an emphasis on the visual, he prefigured cultural trends in African American culture that continue to the present moment.

Chester Himes had come of age as a writer just after the time "when the Negro was in vogue," as Langston Hughes famously wrote in *The Big Sea*, his landmark autobiographical examination of the African American literary, social, and artistic renaissance that flowered in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, only to come to a radical standstill as taste and market conditions changed in the late 1930s and 1940s (41). Himes experienced firsthand the vagaries of the U.S. cultural market's relationship to African American cultural production throughout his career. Born in 1909, he had begun writing as the Harlem Renaissance waned, but not long after it had created the conditions for the widespread popular reception of African American protest fiction in the 1940s and 1950s that would come to be defined almost solely by the unprecedented success of Richard Wright. Himes described Wright as "afraid of his imagination" (*My Life of Absurdity*, 201), but Wright would consistently outsell and outshine Himes as a writer.

Wright, who helped create the influential journal *New Challenge* with the Harlem Renaissance luminary Dorothy West and was friends with Langston Hughes, had also begun writing just as the Harlem Renaissance drew to a close (Kinnamon, 68–69). His first published short story collection, *Uncle Tom's Children*, was excitedly received by such important Har-

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lem literary figures as Countee Cullen and Sterling Brown as a necessary challenge to existing literary norms that failed to explore the political, social, and cultural realities of the African American lower classes. Perhaps sensing and hoping to ward off the shifts in taste that would characterize the post–Harlem Renaissance era, Zora Neale Hurston was alone in writing a searing critique of the book that stated: "One wonders what he would have done had he dealt with plots that touched the broader and more fundamental phases of Negro life instead of confining himself to the spectacular" (qtd. in Reilly, 9). Even if praise was not completely universal within Harlem's literary establishment, in a sense Wright's forcing of the African American literary establishment into the realm of what Hurston termed "the spectacular" prefigured new directions in African American literary and cultural aesthetics that would culminate in the 1967 filmic recreation of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and the attendant craze for the images of spectacularized African American urban violence embodied by the Blaxploitation film boom of the 1960s and 1970s.

Spectacular Blackness

Saidiya V. Hartman writes about the ways in which the spectacular nature of African American sufferance informed the establishment of African American subjectivity in the context of slavery, historically connecting African Americans to visuality, public display, and a discourse of suffering in relationship to the limits of the body and the boundaries of the self and other. Forced to "step it up lively," sing, and smile as they processed in shackles up to the auction block, enslaved African Americans were forced to perform "merriment" and "the entertaining" in situations of complete abjection (33). W. E. B. Du Bois labeled this performative duality "double consciousness" in his landmark 1903 treatise on African American subjectivity, *The Souls of Black Folks*, in which he argued, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (16). By the time Hurston criticized Wright's choice to portray African Americans in a manner that was "spectacular," the cultural and political shifts that had created the Harlem Renaissance were already renegotiating the parameters of performativity that Hartman describes in relationship to slave subjectivity or that Du Bois chronicled in 1903.

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Collectively, the popular reception of writers such as West, Hurston, Cullen, and especially Hughes had enabled the conditions for Wright's unprecedented success with mainstream American readers. But when Wright's second book, *Native Son*, became a Book of the Month Selection in 1940, the first book by an African American author to be so distinguished, it was granted a popular success unimaginable to any of the Harlem Renaissance writers. The novel was "a literary phenomenon" according to Sterling Brown, who noted: "Its first edition sold out within three hours, a quarter million copies called for within six weeks" (qtd. in Reilly, 22). The success of Wright's work proved that it was not only possible for African American writers to have a broadly based mainstream success, but that they could also do so while writing social critique involving lower-class African American life.

Native Son had been significantly altered by the Book of the Month Selection Committee to suit the tastes of its readership, as would happen with Wright's second novel, *Black Boy*, which would also become a runaway bestseller with the Book of the Month Selection Committee's help (see Rowley). Richard Wright's success, mediated as it had been by the mainstream literary and publishing establishment, assured that the social protest formula for African American literary production that he outlined in a *New Challenge* editorial entitled "Blueprint for Negro Writing" came to displace for the majority of American readers and writers all other artistic and aesthetic concerns of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement Wright characterized as resulting from "a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro 'geniuses' and burnt-out white Bohemians with money" ("Blueprint," 315). What Hurston had termed the "spectacular" nature of Wright's fiction—his interest in what he described in "Blueprint" as "the long complex (and for the most part, unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a whole culture again"—lay at the heart of the social protest formula (316).

In this same editorial Wright commanded African American writers to use African American culture to overturn the existing social order rather than to simply mine African American folklore for its aesthetic or artistic merits as Hurston had done. Though Chester Himes started out writing social protest fiction, this sense of social mission would be displaced by an interest in what he termed "the absurdity of the Negro condition" (*My Life of Absurdity*, 203). Himes did not write to "do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die," as Wright had dictated the Afri-

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can American author must in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (316). Rather than seeking models in the "consciousness and mobility for economic and political action" of the African American working class, as Wright had "in the Negro workers' struggles to free [Angelo] Herndon and the Scottsboro boys," Himes wrote about a palpable, colorless, and futile racialized fear that was, finally, "absurd." Himes eventually achieved the economic and critical success that had eluded him in the United States through the publication of his popular detective fiction in Europe.

This success in a popular, commercially driven genre stood for Himes in marked contrast to the critical literary acclaim achieved by Richard Wright in the U.S. cultural arena. Despite his eventual success overseas, in the end Himes felt a profound rejection by the U.S. publishing industry and reading public that had lionized Wright. He wrote in the second volume of his autobiography, *My Life of Absurdity:* "Nothing in all my life hurt me as much as the American rejection of my thoughts" (110). However, when he reacted to the perceived rejection of his work by a U.S. reading public with a decision to leave the country permanently for Europe, he was aided and encouraged by Richard Wright.[6] Himes's work—with its emphasis on lower-class urban vernacular culture—and Wright's ability to make the African American struggle popular in a broad mainstream context would end up defining the parameters of postwar African American cultural expression. Zora Neale Hurston's fears that Wright "confin[ed] himself to the spectacular" would prefigure the creation of a postwar African American culture that was profoundly visual, aggressively vernacular, and grounded in urban lower-class cultural and political expression.

Cotton Comes to Harlem, Black Authenticity, and the New "Black Aesthetic"

As *Cotton Comes to Harlem* went into production in 1967, the United States stood on the brink of a cultural transformation initiated by the Civil Rights Movement and marked by the postsegregation call for Black Power and the search to define the contours of a discrete Black aesthetic. Himes would unwittingly leave the United States in 1953 at the culmination of a revolution in the production of African American literary culture and return in 1965 as part of a developing revolution in the relationship between African American literary culture, visual culture, and American popular culture. Frustrated over the reception of his own early racially themed social pro-

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test novels and by the realist contours that were coming to define African American literary production, Himes left the United States in the early part of his career to live in permanent exile in Europe, where he would continue his writing career almost exclusively for European presses. Chief among Himes's complaints about the American literary scene was what he viewed as its inability to integrate his work into the rigidly developing contours of realism being set for African American fiction, which he considered overly restrictive, formulaic, and proscriptive. He wrote in his autobiography: "To Americans I was a nigger lost from home—as *Time* wrote, 'Amidst Alien Corn'—and I wasn't supposed to write anything of value. . . . But I took myself seriously as a writer of absurd stories and the Americans could go to hell. Maybe that's why they resented me so much" (201).

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 marked the beginning of institutionalized desegregation in its sweeping gestures of reform, but it also marked the beginning of a significant shift in the consumption, distribution, and production of African American popular culture. Just as it signified the symbolic beginning of African American inclusion in wider U.S. culture, Himes's brief return to the United States to fulfill a landmark contractual agreement with the Hollywood mogul Samuel Goldwyn Jr. to complete three films based on his novels also marked the quiet beginning of a wider U.S. interest in production and consumption of popular visual images of African American culture. These cultural currents would give birth to the genre of Blaxploitation film, the creation and crossover of soul music from an amalgamation of older genres and traditions, and vibrant literary and poetic movements that sprang from the desire to articulate a new Black aesthetic. As did Himes's work, African American culture after 1964 would blur the lines between popular culture and high art and complicate even as it attempted to delineate notions such as realism, authenticity, experience, and commercially driven expression.

Despite Himes's claims that he was writing absurdist fiction, the popularity of his detective series—which would spawn two Blaxploitation-era films in the United States, film adaptations in Europe, and translations into several European languages—relied heavily on the conventions of authenticity and realism that determined the consumption of African American literature in a period dominated by the dictates of protest fiction as defined by the work of Richard Wright. In many ways Himes saw himself as working much more in the tradition of William Faulkner, whose characters he also labeled "absurd," than in the realist tradition of African

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American writing epitomized by Wright (*My Life*, 217). Despite this, the reception of Himes's literature as a realist documentation of ghetto life persisted throughout his career, even though the very conditions leading to the creation of his Harlem detective series were antithetical to that reality. Living in exile and in dire need of money, Himes undertook the now celebrated detective series at the behest of the French publisher Marcel Duhamel, primarily because Duhamel was willing to pay large sums of money upfront for the unwritten novels. Himes described the process of accepting Duhamel's offer to publish his work in *La Serie noire* as "consenting to being seduced" (*My Life*, 103).

According to Himes, Duhamel "asked me to write my first thriller, and advised me on the structure of a detective novel, the importance of dialogue, and suggested how I should develop the plot, characters, general atmosphere, and suspense. As a result, I wrote exclusively for *Serie noire* . . . the catalyst was Marcel Duhamel . . . It's Duhamel who created Himes, the writer of detective fiction" (see Cullaz). Himes's writing during this period was very much driven by the constrictions of the detective fiction genre as defined by Duhamel, including the choice of Harlem as a locale and the gangster underworld as the thematic nexus. Himes would later claim about his detective series that "without Duhamel's instruction and financial help I would never have written it" (*My Life*, 111).

While Himes was unequivocal about Marcel Duhamel's role in the creation of his detective series, he was less clear about his own relationship to the symbolic landscape of Harlem and the question of authenticity, and he made the almost contradictory claims that "what makes me happy is that the people of Harlem can recognize each spot in the city, and see themselves mirrored in one character or another in my books" (qtd. in Cullaz, 144), and also, "I didn't really know what it was like to be a citizen of Harlem; I never worked there, raised children there, been hungry, sick or poor there. I had been *as much of a tourist as a white man from downtown changing his luck. The Harlem of my books was never meant to be real; I never called it real; I just wanted to take it away from the white man if only in my books*" (*My Life*, 126, emphasis added). In labeling himself "as much of a tourist as the white man from downtown changing his luck," Himes was not only challenging the notion of himself as a documentarian of Harlem life, he was also significantly rescripting his encounters in Harlem through the language of vice, commerce, and exploitation.[7]

Chester Himes had been born in Jefferson City, Missouri, while his father

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was a professor in an African American industrial college, and he grew up mostly in Ohio, where he also served a lengthy stint in prison for petty larceny as a young man. He had, however, spent relatively little time in Harlem.[8] While his early writings in prison on criminality were hard-bitten social realist texts, the Harlem detective series he produced for Marcel Duhamel was by contrast a heavily stylized and ironic product. It is marked by what Himes himself would call "absurd" situations, such the one indicated in the title *Blind Man with a Pistol,* or by motivation and action, as in *Run, Man, Run,* in which the chief protagonist spends the entire novel being chased by variously malevolent characters throughout the streets of Harlem. Himes's detective novels are less "whodunnits" in the classical detective novel sense than representations of the stylized portrait of African American life that he wished to create. His first novel, *For the Love of Imabelle,* which became *A Rage in Harlem* in its U.S. translation, contains many of the key tropes and stock cast of characters that would characterize and consequently signify African American ghetto life for generations of consumers of African American popular culture to come: hustlers, con men, greed, vice, and the struggle of ordinary people to stay alive and "make it."

Undoubtedly influenced by the rising world visibility of African American political activism in the United States, Himes added politically radical "Black militants" to his stock cast of tropes for the stylized social chaos of 1965's *Cotton Comes to Harlem,* the seventh novel in the series, which imagines Harlem's Black militants as the proponents of a corrupt, self-serving, Marcus Garvey–styled "Back to Africa" movement. *Cotton Comes to Harlem* moves the Harlem Precinct's "ace" Black detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones rapidly through a series of confrontations with a newly articulated Black consciousness, urban African American despair, the cruelty and indifference of white city officials, and a viciously articulated Harlem criminal underworld. In characteristic fashion, Himes represents Harlem as a place of absurd lawlessness, the logic of which is decodable only to those who possess an African American vernacular sense of American culture, an intimate understanding of African Americans themselves, and a knowledge of the urban terrain on which African Americans were forced to compete, not only with corruption and white injustice, but with each other as well.

However, even given its critical seriousness and its depiction of the social injustice and racism of the United States, the novel is hardly a documentation of social reality. Instead, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* offers a

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cartoonishly ironic romp through the symbols, signs, and language of African American cultural history. At one point Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed see "democracy at work" in the image of two elderly white men shining "colored" men's shoes under an awning that reads "American Legion Shoe Shine," while nearby, white men get their shoes shined by elderly "colored" men under an awning announcing "Father Divine Shoe Shine," and in the next moment, a ribald dancer at Harlem's notorious Cotton Club writhes obscenely against a bale of cotton while crying out, "ohhh, daddy cotton!" (129, 147). *Cotton Comes to Harlem* doesn't so much parody African American representation in mainstream culture as call attention to the absurdity of a history of representation based on what Himes claims are essentially faulty racial presumptions. For this reason, the corruption of the "Back to Africa" movement is juxtaposed in the novel with the cartoonish retrogressiveness of the "Back to the Southland" movement, which seeks to send homesick, newly urban African Americans back to the cotton fields of the South. Cotton coming to Harlem is not a metaphor for a pastoral bounty arriving in an urban wasteland of poverty and despair. Instead, Himes's cast of characters maim and execute one another in a vain search for a bale of cotton stuffed with money that has already been claimed by an elderly African American junk dealer named Cotton Bud, who uses his ill-gotten gains to finance his own return to Africa.

In its novelistic form, *Cotton Comes to Harlem* both anticipated and helped to create several important trends in the articulation of African American popular culture during the Black Power era, especially as it was translated through the idioms of visual culture. Chief among these concerns was negotiating a rhetoric of Black empowerment through a discourse of Black masculinity, especially in relation to the law. Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones's status as "outlaw" lawmen who stand in an always fraught relationship to the law became a standard, oft-repeated trope during the Black action-film boom of the 1970s that *Cotton Comes to Harlem* helped initiate. But Himes's concern with the relationship of Black masculinity to U.S. culture through a discourse of law and order also became a major organizing principle for Black radical discourse, as epitomized by the Black Panther Party's call to "the brother on the block" to "pick up the gun" (Foner, 212).

By 1967, scriptwriters for the film version of the novel at MGM Studios, which included at various times Himes himself, the actor and social activist Ossie Davis, and the playwright LeRoi Jones, would imagine Harlem's

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activists not as followers of Marcus Garvey but rather as proponents of a Black Power ideology obviously modeled after the stylized visual rhetoric of the Black Panther Party. As had Himes's Harlem detective series, Black Power culture as epitomized by the Black Panther Party would valorize urban identity and street culture as primary expressions of Black authenticity and also resistance. The Black Panthers Party's particular fascination with the visual rhetoric of urban culture and its ongoing involvement with African American vernacular style were very much in keeping with the version of African American culture being commodified by projects such as the film adaptation of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. The party's engagement with issues of urban poverty, policing, and social justice were negotiated through a rewriting of African American vernacular cultural symbols such as the gun, the criminal as the "bad nigger," and the righteous outlaw, which turned them into potent visual metaphors of urban injustice.

The vision of African American culture as urban, outlaw, and vernacular so powerfully affected developing notions of race, urbanity, and culture that it would greatly contribute to the distillation of that vision throughout American popular culture at large. The Blaxploitation genre would seemingly cement in the lexicon of U.S. popular culture the vision of African American cultural authenticity as primarily constituted by the vernacular archetypes of the glamorous gangster, the pretty pimp, the Black radical, the hustler, the beautiful "bad" woman, and the con man mixing it up in the unrelentingly mean streets of the urban ghetto. However, this vision of African American urban culture stems as much from Himes's ironic, market-driven, expatriate vision of African American urbanity as it did from the social protest movement in which Black Power ideology was disseminated across popular culture.

Himes, in his role as a consultant for the filming of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, relished the opportunity to return to New York City, especially for extended visits to Harlem. Although Himes had figured large in the formulation of Harlem's reputation internationally, he was, admittedly, not intimately acquainted with it. Himes had not intended the "Harlem Series," as the detective novels became known, to provide a strict documentation of Harlem life. Though the novels were lauded internationally for their gritty, poetic street realism, the "Harlem" of Himes's detective novels is most accurately seen as an amalgamation of his earlier social protest agenda, a reflection of a now past experience of U.S. racial injustice, and a poet's complex sensibility for the cadences and rhythms of African American ver-

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nacular culture fused to a strong, editorially driven sensibility about what version of African American social reality would sell abroad.

Unlike Himes's earlier novels, these books did not represent an attempt to document the social realities of racial injustice, though they were largely received that way in Europe. "I would sit in my room and become hysterical thinking about the wild, incredible story I was writing. But it was only for the French, I thought, and they would believe anything about Americans, black or white, if it was bad enough," Himes wrote in *My Life of Absurdity* (109). Ultimately, it could be argued that Himes's detective series was not really about Harlem at all, but it could also be argued that it was all about Harlem if we accept, as Himes appeared to, that the postwar African American urban social and aesthetic reality was concentrated in the seamy nexus of commerce, vice, and disposable culture. Himes observed in his autobiography that though the *La Serie noire* "was considered the junkyard of writers, Richard Wright had never earned as much money from a book published by a trade publisher in France as I was earning from [it]" (124). But regarding Wright's work, Himes also grudgingly acknowledged that "at least his books were accepted as literature."

Himes's first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), was a portrait of the downward spiral of the life of a young African American dockworker at a Los Angeles shipyard recently integrated by African American and female workers because of the conscription of white male workers during World War II. It stands as a strong indictment of Black patriotism, wartime ambivalence about legally sanctioned policies of segregation, and African American prospects for inclusion in the "American Dream." *Lonely Crusade* (1947), a novel about an alienated African American intellectual hired to help unionize African American workers at a shipping factory, is a hard-bitten indictment of the racial politics of the labor movement in the United States and the Communist Party.

Himes's work continuously challenged the boundaries for inclusion and exclusion of African American cultural production within mainstream U.S. culture. He experienced the reception of *Lonely Crusade* as so vicious that he characterized it in an interview as "a terrible humiliation"; this would be the catalyst for him to join the ranks of permanent expatriates living first in France and then in Spain, where he died in 1984 (see Fabre, 129). Himes's detective novels, for which he was awarded the prestigious French *Grand prix de la litérature policiere,* were characterized much more by their high stylization, absurdity, and comedic irony—exemplified by the title

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Real Cool Killers—than by any obvious social protest message. A "working writer" who often angered other writers and intellectuals with his claims that he wrote simply to make a living, Himes was forced to largely abandon social protest fiction after he began writing his Harlem detective series. Of the ten novels Himes completed between the time he began the series in 1957 and his death in 1984, only *A Case of Rape* lies outside the popular detective genre.[9]

Himes's removal from African American vernacular culture to Europe and his somewhat belated realization that African American writing could be commercially viable did not remove him from the much vaunted realm of "Black authenticity" that became the hallmark of Black Power–era cultural expression. Himes was often grouped with popular African American "street realist" writers such as Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck). In fact, Donald Goines claimed that he had been inspired to write while serving one of many long prison terms and reading the work of the pimp-turned-novelist Iceberg Slim and Chester Himes.[10] The main character of Goines's first novel is named "Chester Hines," in an obvious tribute to this inspiration. Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, however, came of age as writers when the parameters of Black authenticity had already been set by Chester Himes and Black Power culture, so much so that their personas were more those of the pimp or street hustler who wrote than that of a former prisoner who wrote, as Chester Himes described himself. But Himes, Goines, and Beck would participate in and help create the postwar African American culture that popularized African American vice by making it commercially viable, and then mystified that process of commodification by designating it as the "authentic" expression of African American culture.

Melvin Van Peebles, the financial success of whose own controversial first film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song!*, is generally credited with sparking Hollywood studios' commercial interest in African American film, had early seen the powerful visual potential of African American vice. He had become a personal friend of Himes while living temporarily in France and had even turned Himes's *Serie noire* novel *For the Love of Imabelle* into a comic strip for a French magazine. In his initial instruction on how to write for the *Serie noire*, Marcel Duhamel had instructed Himes to "start with action . . . always action in detail. Make pictures. Like motion pictures" (*My Life*, 102). In this way, Duhamel had unintentionally helped Himes to anticipate visual culture's burgeoning place of importance in Af-

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rican American postwar culture. Both Van Peebles and Himes were also visionary in their ability to see the iconographic power of images of African American urban criminal culture in postwar America. While African American writers and artists had long been interested in African American urbanity and also in African American criminality, Himes and Van Peebles were prescient in seeing the powerful potential of those cultures and then linking them to emerging possibilities in visual culture, particularly in popular film. Between the release of *Cotton Comes to Harlem* in 1970 and the end of the Black film boom in 1976, an unprecedented number of "Black cast" films would be released, and most of these would be violent action films.

Cultural Change and the Black Arts Movement

By 1968, the cultural, social, and political landscape had changed so much that artists, politicians, and cultural workers alike were not only declaring "a new day in Babylon" with regard to violence and empowerment but also witnessing the birth of a Black Arts Movement and its attendant proclamation of a uniquely Black aesthetic. In the Black Arts Movement's manifesto, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal wrote:

> The political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists. A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms. The Black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics. . . . The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the needs of Black people. Therefore, the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary writers is to confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist West. Currently, these writers are re-evaluating Western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art. Implicit in this re-evaluation is the need to develop a "black aesthetic." It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structures. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. (257–58)

Neal's declaration of the need for separate cultural spaces and separate spheres of symbolic articulation was more than the rejection of white

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culture and the West as which it was often read. It represented an almost utopian longing for a discrete space of cultural expression free from the corruption that he saw as linked explicitly and implicitly to participation in U.S. commodified culture. In defining the Black aesthetic later in the essay, Neal asserts the aesthetic not only as an overturning of an existing cultural order—"the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world"—but as a moral imperative. Describing the Black Arts Movement as "an ethical movement," he states: "The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressor's?" (259).

In 1970, Gil Scott-Heron famously articulated this longing for a separate, uncorrupted sphere of articulation with an indictment of commodified culture and a declaration that "the revolution would not be televised." Using a series of references to current popular product-endorsement campaigns, Heron asserted that "the revolution" would "not put a tiger in your tank," "go better with Coke," "give your mouth sex appeal," or "kill the germs that cause bad breath." Like Neal, who believed that the Black Arts Movement envisioned "an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America" (257), Scott-Heron sought to articulate an arena of "pure politics" into which commodified U.S. culture would no longer fit.

The Black Arts and Black Power movements' investment in a utopian world outside of the Babylon of commodification occurred, ironically, precisely at the moment when African American vernacular culture experienced a massive crossover commodification through popular film, music, and visual culture. The Black Arts Movement's goal of overturning established aesthetic and cultural norms across a variety of African American representational and expressive traditions and establishing a market-free cultural space occurred just as the Civil Rights Movement was creating unprecedented opportunities for African American social, cultural, and political expression. When the migration from the rural south to urban locations that had been occurring since the turn of the century was heightened by the official desegregation of wartime industries by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1944, African Americans were poised on the cutting edge—albeit at the lowest levels of production—of urban industrialization. African American cultural creators were uniquely positioned to capture the imagination of commodified U.S. culture while at the same time making claims to a culture of resistance that was figured as purely and authenti-

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cally ideologically free from the contamination of the urban industrialized world.

Enter the Black Panther Party

In the postwar period, according to Kobena Mercer, Black identity took on a heightened significance as "an iconic expression of oppositional identities" that would be very much linked to the visual and expressive expression of urban African American street culture documented by *Cotton Comes to Harlem* in its novelistic form and even more so in Ossie Davis's filmic version (300). Mercer links the Black Panther Party's "highly visible oppositional appearance, which clearly differentiated [it] from other strands in black politics," to the development of myriad liberation groups and strategies:

> The political positions of the Black Panthers had an empowering effect in extending the chain of radical democratic equivalences to more and more social groups precisely through their dramatic and provocative visibility in the public sphere. At the level of political discourse, it was this system of equivalences that helped generate the form of women's liberation and gay liberation out of strategic analogies with the goals, and methods, of black liberation, which were themselves based on an analogy with Third World struggles for national liberation. The ten-point platform of the Black Panther Party, articulated by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, formed a discursive framework through which the women's movement and the gay movement displaced the demand for reform and "equality" in favor of the wider goal of revolution and "liberation." The ten-point charter of demands of the Women's Liberation Movement, 1968, and the Gay Liberation Front, 1969, were based on a metaphorical transfer of the terms of liberation of one group into the terms of liberation of others. (303)

The Black Panther Party's political and cultural program, one of the most visible articulations of Black Power ideology, was not without antecedents. In fact, its Ten-Point Program closely resembled the Nation of Islam statement "What We Want, What We Believe," which was printed in *Muhammad Speaks* and *The Final Call*, the official papers of the Nation of Islam since its inception in the 1950s. What made the Black Panther Party's articulation of its ideology different from the Nation of Islam's, however, was

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the fact that cultural spaces had been opened for the party's explosive expression as a multimedia phenomenon by both televisual representations of the civil rights struggle and by postwar cultural shifts in the production of identity. The coalescence of radical ideology as espoused by groups like the Black Panthers and the radically altered postwar social, cultural, and political terrain permitted the emergence of the challenge posed by the Black Arts Movement. This framework linked the articulation of the radical political ethos of Black Power to a radically transformative culture of oppositional creativity. In challenging the ways in which politics can and should engage with culture and art in the U.S. context, the Black Power and Black Arts movements undeniably shaped wider cultural perceptions of what it means to be African American, what it means to engage in social protest, and the interface between identity and political action. This book, *Spectacular Blackness*, is an attempt to assess the long-term implications of these movements for the American cultural and social fabric.

Trying to come to terms with the complicated cultural legacy of the Black Panther Party raises questions about the construction and subsequent commodification of African American radical political culture, which the party created and by which it was also consumed. In "'Don't Believe the Hype': Debunking the Panther Mythology," Charles E. Jones and Judson L. Jeffries cite the belief that "the BPP was a media created organization" as number three in their list of the most prevalent misconceptions about the party and conclude that this myth leads to an assessment of the party in which "BPP visibility and prominence are attributed to a sensationalist-driven media captivated by the revolutionary theatrics of the Panthers" (41). They correctly note that this perception "not only underestimates community support, it also depreciates the dedication of the organizational membership." What Jones and Jeffries fail to appreciate, however, are the ways in which this perception also greatly underestimates the Black Panther Party's own participation in and manipulation of the media cult that sprang up around it.

As Manthia Diawara has said in the edited collection *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, "Popular culture has always been where Black people theorize Blackness in America" (qtd. in Simon, 236), and popular culture played a central role in the Black Panther Party's propagation of a Black Power political culture. In fact, the Black Panther Party evinced a better understanding of popular culture than many similar organizations, cultural workers, and critics. Since it was not only invested in influencing Ameri-

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can popular culture of the period but was also in the business of creating it, the party's engagement with African American popular culture has had a widespread effect. A major reason that the Panther legacy continues to live on long after the ideas and contributions of similar organizations such as the Revolutionary Action Committee or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee have long been forgotten is the party's consciousness of the importance of media culture and its brilliance in using it to challenge American culture in general. Without a serious reassessment of the Panthers' utilization of media culture, the myth that they were created by the mainstream media will continue. More important, it will be impossible to gain a serious understanding of the ways in which the Black Panther Party influenced and shaped the popular visual culture that followed it. For this reason, *Spectacular Blackness* explores the Black Panther Party's legacy specifically in terms of its interaction with popular visual and media culture and its affiliation with white radicals in order to begin to understand the conscious dissemination of radical Black political culture throughout other cultural forms of the era.

One of the major unacknowledged and unexplored ways in which the Black Panther Party influenced African American culture was through valorizing "the brothers on the block" as the authentic repositories of "the Black experience." Recent essays by Chris Booker, Charles E. Jones, Floyd W. Hayes, and Francis A. Kiene, collected in Jones's *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, address the party's influential attempts to organize the African American lumpen-proletariat class as the vanguard of a revolutionary Black freedom struggle. Influenced by Frantz Fanon's attempt in *The Wretched of the Earth* to rescue the lumpen proletariat from its condemnation as an unstable political force in traditional Marxist thought, Hayes and Kiene contend that Newton and the party provided "one of the most controversial aspects of their political ideology and practice" in their attempts to champion "the brother on the block" as possessing the ultimate revolutionary potential (161).

This challenge to traditional Marxist-Leninist practice and thought proved influential in many spheres of African American cultural production, affecting everything from music, art, and film in particular to political and cultural thought in general. The notion that African American culture resides exclusively in the urban ghetto among the poorest and most disenfranchised of the African American population continues to be pervasive in post–Black Power African American culture. The jury is still out

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as to whether the Black Panther Party's focus on the lumpen proletariat was effective as an organizing methodology or was, as Booker contends, a major contributing factor to the party's rapid demise. However, the valorization of "the brothers on the block" as the guarantors of an authentic "Black experience" and the demonization of the "middle-class Negro" has continued to haunt African American notions of "authenticity" and has not been widely assessed. This remains true despite the fact that class tension continues to be a major shaping force in African American culture today.

The Panthers' presence is still felt in everything from the popularization of the term "Black" to describe African Americans to the multiple insertions of the party's critique of policing into American popular consciousness. Recent books by and about former members of the Black Panther Party, including Mumia Abu-Jamal's *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (2004), Johnny Spain's *Black Power, White Blood: The Life and Times of Johnny Spain* (2000), Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1992), David Hilliard's *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (1993), and Hugh Pearson's biography *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (1994), have sparked a reassessment and analysis of the party's status in African American culture. The 1995 reissue by Writers and Readers Press of Huey Newton's long-out-of-print autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide,* and a popular but previously hard-to-obtain essay collection *To Die for the People,* along with the inclusion of *Black Panthers* by Herb Boyd in the press's popular "For Beginners" series of documentary comic books has helped revive a wide popular interest in the legacy of the Black Panther Party. Avant-garde artists have explored the imagery of the Black Panther Party since Jean Luc Goddard's 1968 experimental documentary *Sympathy for the Devil* paired actors portraying the Panthers with documentary footage of the Rolling Stones. In 2003, the jazz composer Fred Ho created "The Black Panther Suite" for his Afro Asian Music Ensemble, and Roger Guenveur Smith explored the legacy of Huey P. Newton with a 2001 Obie Award–winning stage play, *The Huey P. Newton Story.* More than ever since the party's official demise, there is an ongoing attempt to assess the challenges present in the party's critique of policing and its Ten-Point Platform.

The most salient critique that the party offered of American society was directed at the justice system and the role played by police and mass incarceration in institutionalizing state repression. The facts that the U.S.

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prison population has grown steadily since 1973 and that the state of California currently incarcerates more people than Great Britain, Germany, Japan, France, Singapore, and the Netherlands combined, the vast majority of these prisoners being nonwhite, make the Panthers' critique of the prison industrial complex seem almost visionary.[11] Because the jail and prison population in the United States is composed primarily of members of racial minority groups, particularly African Americans, the prison crisis remains a problem of particular importance to African Americans. These two issues help account for the Black Panther Party's ghostly presence in African American popular culture and make a reassessment of the Black Panther Party legacy especially necessary at this time.

The Black Panther Party's critique of policing and its famous demand that African Americans "pick up the gun" in defense of the African American community were too often scripted into a discourse of "recovering Black manhood." The image of the Black Panther Party retained by many is rightfully characterized as highly stylized, hypermasculine, military Black macho. This image stems directly from cultural memories of the party's military-style parade drills and the ever-present image of the African American man with a gun, combined with Eldridge Cleaver's command that African American women invoke "Pussy Power" in defense of the Party and his pro-rape polemic in *Soul on Ice*. The Black macho mythos of the party often obscures, now as it did then, the complexity of the party's official stance on gender politics and the serious nature of its dialogue with and engagement in issues of gender parity. The facts that the Black Panther Party was the first, and for many years the only, national African American organization to speak out in favor of gay rights or to make open alliances with a homosexual rights group, and that the organization had many women in positions of power are hidden by the macho mythos that surrounds the party. Recent work by Angela Y. Davis, Joy James, Regina Jennings, Elaine Brown, Angela Brown, and Tracye Matthews highlights the role of women within the party, bringing necessary complexity and insight to our understanding of its gender dynamic both as a lived reality and as articulated in its official position papers. Such work suggests an urgent need to redefine the group's relevance to popular culture.

A cultural analysis of the Black Panther Party provides the crucial vantage point from which to begin a reassessment of the cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The discourse of Black liberation fueled a great deal of post–civil rights African American culture, including popular music in

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its varied forms of rhythm and blues, soul, and funk. The party's engagement with popular culture and the subsequent critique of that engagement are reenacted in the Black Arts Movement's attempts to delineate a Black aesthetic as well as in the debates surrounding the commercialization of African American popular music and Hollywood's rescripting of Black Power into Blaxploitation films.

Black to the Future

The Black Arts Movement, which was labeled the "sister to the Black Power concept" by Larry Neal (*Visions of a Liberated Future*, 257), significantly shaped the way in which an entire generation of cultural and artistic critics and practitioners defined their roles within society and culture, but its legacy has been more misunderstood and obscure than that of the Black Panther Party, despite its equally pervasive influence. By presenting the culture of the everyday African American struggle as one worthy of serious scholarly recognition and analysis, the movement contributed to the current formation of African American studies and to a general understanding of what is valuable about African American culture. Problematic as it would become, the decision to make "the Black experience" of "the average Negro" the central determinant in the figuration of a "Black aesthetic" was a truly critical break with past conceptualizations of the ways in which African American art was constructed. The movement consciously dispensed with the idea that African American artists and intellectuals should be busy formulating a plan for the creation of a "New Negro" or that they should operate as a "Talented Tenth" to lead the race to conclusions that they did not already possess. Though the movement was relatively short-lived, its challenges to the status quo helped institutionalize African American literature and culture as legitimate objects of intellectual scrutiny. It continues to exert a powerful influence on artists' ideas about themselves and their art. In his introduction to *The Leroi Jones Reader*, William J. Harris rightfully claims, "No post–Black Arts artist thinks of himself or herself as simply a human being who happens to be black; blackness is central to his or her experience and art" (xxvi).

African American popular culture's tributes to icons of the 1960s and 1970s represent the ascendancy of the aesthetic that was championed by the Black Arts Movement. Members of the Black Panther Party were often openly suspicious of those (including Black Arts spokesman LeRoi Jones)

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whom they deemed to be overly invested in cultural politics; the Panthers derisively labeled them "cultural nationalists." The Black Arts Movement's valorization of everyday African American urban culture, however, was very much in keeping with the Black Panther Party's elevation of "the brothers on the block" to vanguard status in radical African American politics. In contemporary culture, that which is urban, black, and poor continues to be marked as the most authentic manifestation of African American culture. Everyone from conservative pundits such as John McWhorter and Shelby Steele to politically progressive cultural workers such as *The Boondocks* cartoonist Aaron McGruder constructs urban authenticity as the dominant mood of African American cultural articulation.

The notion that the urban poor experience is definitional in the construction of African American identity is largely a result of the Black Arts/Black Power moment. The central questions first cogently posed by the Black Arts Movement continue to remain unanswered and mostly unexplored. How would African American artists and intellectuals be accountable to the masses of African American people? How would the masses of African American people be integrated into the dominant culture? What stood to be lost and what stood to be gained for African American culture if the project of integration was a success?

The Black Arts Movement was very much concerned with actualizing its demands for self-determined African American cultural production through the creation of independent venues for cultural exchange. Though many of these journals, artistic spaces, theater companies, writing groups, and collectives did not survive the 1970s, the imperative to create independent avenues for African American culture has yet to die down. One of the most significant failures of the Black Arts Movement was the failure of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School of Harlem. Created by an artists' collective spearheaded by LeRoi Jones to be a self-sustaining showcase for the artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals of the movement, the Black Arts Theater had a brief but mercurial history. Sonia Sanchez, Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Ed Bullins, and LeRoi Jones himself showcased their work there until the theater's demise less than six months after opening its doors. Rather than signaling the radical impossibility of the Black Arts proposition, Larry Neal argues that the Black Arts Theater's history "proved that there was a definite need for a cultural revolution in the Black community" ("Some Reflections," 262).

Though much of the work is currently out of print, the anthologies of

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the Black Arts Movement remain as tributes to the notion of radical collectivity embodied by the spirit of the Black Arts Theater and other efforts like it. Like so many others of the era, Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones responded to the failure of ventures like the Black Arts Theater of Harlem with the creation of anthologies such as *Black Fire! An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. These anthologies recreated, in a condensed, retainable, and sustainable form, the highest ideals of the Black Arts Movement—a revolutionary, communal, and collective effort. In the five-year period between 1967 and 1973, more than thirty new anthologies were published, many by small or independent presses. Ranging in subject matter from prisoners' literature to collections of African American women's literature and poetry, they represent the flowering of the Black Arts principle of self-determined, independent Black creation.

Black Fire! An Anthology of Afro-American Writing, published by Neal and Jones in 1968, presented the work of some of the most important artists and intellectuals of the Black Arts Movement, among them John Henrik Clarke, Calvin C. Hernton, Stokely Carmichael, Sun Ra, K. William Kgositsile, David Henderson, Sonia Sanchez, Harold Cruse, A. B. Spellman, Stanley Crouch, Lorenzo Thomas, and Victor Hernandez Cruz. The anthology represented an attempt to counter the attack against African American collectivity occurring in both political and artistic circles. While efforts to destroy African American political organizations such as the Black Panther Party are now well known, the difficulties encountered by artistic and cultural ventures is less so. In "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal documents the problems the Black Arts Theater faced in dealing with governmental agencies, which were at least partially responsible for its funding. Efforts such as *Black Fire!* allowed Neal and Jones to propagate the ideas of the Black Arts Movement without interference.

One of the key tenets of the Black Arts Movement was the belief that African American music was the preeminent example of Black aesthetic production. Black Arts poets wrote odes to John Coltrane, Sun Ra, Coleman Hawkins, Sonny Rollins, Billie Holiday, and Pharaoh Saunders. Critics wrote essays in which they professed music to be "the vanguard reflection of black feeling and the continuous repository of black consciousness," as Ron Welburn claimed in "The Black Aesthetic Imperative" (126). Clayton Riley stated that Black music worked to "show Black people . . . how much it is possible to love themselves for being what they are" (297). And LeRoi

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Jones simply concluded that the blues "remained the exact replication of The Black Man In The West" (*Black Music*, 297). Although the Black Arts Movement claimed all forms of African American music as nearly sacred manifestations of the Black aesthetic, it was mostly the folk-based African American forms of jazz, gospel, and the blues that were meant when they referred to the "MUSIC of twenty-two million Black souls" (Cobb, 524).

The Black Arts Movement's interest in jazz and the blues and its attendant lack of interest in the African American popular music that was developing in tandem with them is problematic for a number of significant reasons. By the 1960s and 1970s, African American musical forms such as the blues, gospel, and jazz had largely been displaced for "the average Negro" by the popular forms of rhythm and blues, soul, and eventually funk. While Black Arts critics are often quick to acknowledge that "the man standing in line for the Otis Redding show at the Apollo almost certainly never heard of tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler," this fact does not often color their analysis of Black music production or nuance their understanding of a Black aesthetic (L. Neal and L. Jones, 167). Also, at this time, Black Power discourse and the discourse of the Black Arts Movement were seeping into popular music and art. Popular music was replete with celebrations of the new Black Power politics in terms of lyrics as well as stylistic choices in presentation on stage and on album covers. This fact goes mostly unnoted by the Black Arts Movement critics who dismiss popular music either as trivial and corrupted or as more of "the changing same," as LeRoi Jones labeled rhythm and blues in putting it together with contemporary jazz in *Black Music* (180).

This points to an essential problematic of the Black Arts Movement, namely, the critics' inability to theorize the effects of commodification on African American cultural production, which is tied to a fear of the effects of integration on the African American community. The anxiety focuses in particular on the African American middle class and a fear of losing the essential "struggle" quality, which the Black Arts Movement attributes to the Black experience. In "Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics," James A. Emanuel quotes the Black Arts poet A. B. Spellman's image of white colleges in the future "turning out hundreds of black-talking *bourgies* with Ph.D.s in Malcolm X and John Coltrane" (208) and draws on Edward Vaughn's fears that Black studies programs will become no more than "agencies for spying on Black people" (209). While the Black Arts Movement never ultimately

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settled the issues that arose in the wake of postintegration cultural politics, the negotiations it attempted around cultural production, community, and integration deserve renewed scrutiny.

The final portion of *Spectacular Blackness* deals directly with the much-maligned Black film boom of the 1960s and 1970s that created the genre of Blaxploitation film. Blaxploitation film raises several important questions with regard to consumption, commodification, and African American cultural production, including the possibilities for resistance within commodified culture. By 1965 the images traditionally created in Hollywood to account for African American existence were inconsistent with the images created by the widely televised rebellion in Watts. Images from films such as *Shaft* (1971), *Three The Hard Way* (1974), *Cleopatra Jones* (1972), and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song!* (1971) consciously and openly contested images from films such as *Judge Priest* (1934), *Hallelujah* (1929),and *Lilies of the Field* (1963). Yet the question remains, how significantly did Blaxploitation films deviate from the standard script that Hollywood had created of African Americans in relation to visual culture?

In Los Angeles, the lives of African American people had long been ordered by a repressive policing regime structured by an equally oppressive visual regime. This went beyond the standard American practice of criminalizing populations based on racially demarcated visual cues. The Los Angeles Police Department instituted and subjected its African American population to an entire oppressive policing regime based on visuality: recognition, surveillance, and visual identification. Independently produced films made during the Black film boom of this era, such as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song!* and *Dolemite II: The Human Tornado* (1976), attempt to provide a counterdiscourse to the visual history of Los Angeles. In "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," Gil Scott-Heron cautioned: "There will be no pictures of you and Willie Mae pushing that shopping cart down the block at a dead run or trying to slide that t.v. into a stolen ambulance" (61).

Much of Black Power–era politics was negotiated through popular media venues such as the evening news, popular music, and film. Blaxploitation film provides an opportunity to examine the revolutionary possibilities of popular visual culture and also to begin to account for the pleasure possibilities of popular culture for African American that goes beyond "false consciousness" as an explanation. In the last chapter, I view the Black Arts Movement's engagement with jazz and the blues as "Black classical music"

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and its nonengagement with other African American popular music, such as funk, soul, and rhythm and blues, and African American popular visual culture as symptomatic of its larger failures to address questions about urbanization and the creation and consumption of both folk and mass culture.

Though Chester Himes had been prescient enough in his understanding of developing postwar American culture to see the potential for particular tropes of urbanity that he developed in his Harlem detective series, he ultimately rejected Black Power ideology and aesthetics. In a final, unfinished novel, *Plan B,* Himes resolved longstanding tensions between his two detectives around their relationship to their position as mediators between the white establishment and the African American urban underclass by having one of the detectives kill the other in a dispute over a planned Black Power revolt in Harlem. Rather than suggesting that such an act is heroic, the conclusion of *Plan B* constructs Black Power as an ultimately divisive and destructive force for urban African Americans and faults Black Power culture for failing to form a cohesive strategy for implementing its goal of cultural and political revolution. Rather than portraying Black Power culture as having failed to effect its promised revolution, *Spectacular Blackness* posits that the very contradictions inherent in Black radical notions such as vanguardism and the acceptance of the vanguard model into cultural politics by the Black Arts Movement and Black popular culture critically formed the ways in which we continue to understand Black identity, Black community, and Black cultural production.

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1
"Black Is Beautiful!"

BLACK POWER CULTURE, VISUAL CULTURE, AND THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

> One does not necessarily have to wait for a revolutionary situation to arise; it can be created.
>
> —Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare*

> LITTLE JOHNNY IN SCHOOL
>
> Little Johnny says, "My brother was in Vietnam and got shot in the ass."
>
> The teacher says, "Hey freeze, freeze. Don't say 'ass,' say 'rectum.'"
>
> Little Johnny says, "'Rect 'um?' Shit, it killed 'um!"
>
> —Richard Pryor, *Bicentennial Nigger*

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Guerilla Warfare Che Guevara's Armed Struggle and the Black Panther Party

Ernesto "Che" Guevara's simple formulation of the factors that enabled the 1965 revolution in Cuba and that could potentially enable revolution throughout the world were widely read and highly influential among all who considered themselves dispossessed and revolutionary during the social and cultural upheaval of the mid-1960s to late 1970s. In a 1968 film, *Black Panther,* created by the Third World Newsreel Collective and the Black Panther Party to highlight their cause and the situation of their imprisoned leader, Huey P. Newton, the camera pauses didactically on a copy of *Venceremos,* a 1969 collection of Guevara's speeches and essays, as Newton describes from his jail cell the goals of the party and its possible sphere

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of influence by using the Cuban revolution as a metaphor for the possibilities for Black revolution in the West.

Guevara greatly favored military action over political action, and most influential with the Black Panther Party was his claim that, rather than wait for revolutionary situations to arise as traditional Leninist Marxism demanded, the guerilla had a duty to create revolution through his own actions. This also transformed the configuration of revolutionary struggles for "land and freedom" not only throughout the agrarian economies of Latin America and Africa but also throughout the urban, industrialized United States and Europe.[1] Groups influenced by Guevara's concept of armed struggle included not only the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, but organizations as diverse as the Red Army Faction in West Germany, the Red Brigade in Italy, and the Weather Underground, the Black Liberation Army, and George Jackson's incipient People's Army in the United States.

Throughout *Guerilla Warfare,* Che Guevara maintained a singular focus on revolution as a military possibility alone. However, his "*indispensable* condition" that "the guerilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area" had the unintended consequence of privileging symbolic as much as actual military action (4). This, combined with the Black Panthers' media-savvy approach and the explosion of interest in popular African American culture in the late 1960s and 1970s, expanded Guevara's model of revolution so that it could allow for victories the significance of which Guevara could neither have anticipated nor accounted for. The Black Panther Party would largely fail in its nearly fifteen years of existence at its final goal to "serve and liberate the colony, by the only means necessary—the GUN," as the first issue of the Black Panther Community News Service proclaimed (Foner, 8). In a seeming contradiction to Guevara's fundamental belief that the symbolic actions of revolutionaries, if effective, would necessarily create the conditions for revolution, the more the Black Panther Party seemed to fail in the actual armed struggle, the greater were its successes in convincing U.S. culture of the necessity not only for the party's own existence but for revolution itself. In the end, the Panthers' successes would lie more in the influence they wielded in the arena of popular culture than in military culture. This chapter explores the apparent contradiction between the party's cultural successes and its political failures, as well as its overall role in defining the parameters of postwar African American culture.

Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare* begins with a chapter titled "Essence" that lists "three fundamental conclusions" that "the Cuban revolution re-

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vealed": "1) Popular forces can win a war against an army. 2) One does not necessarily have to wait for a revolutionary situation to arise; it can be created. 3) In the under-developed countries of the Americas, rural areas are the best battlefields for revolution" (1). For urban self-styled guerillas like the Black Panther Party, the exact relationship between the "three fundamental conclusions" about the Cuban revolution and the possible contradictions between Guevara's call for a rural revolution and the actual urban industrialized conditions in which they existed were less important than Guevara's claim that revolutionary conditions could be created by small, committed groups bound together by certain strategic revolutionary aims. Guevara's theory, dubbed "focoism," was popularized in the West by the French philosopher Regis Debray, who, along with Fidel Castro, was largely responsible for propagating the work of Guevara after his death while attempting to foment guerilla warfare in the jungles of Bolivia in 1967.

According to focoism, small groups of highly trained guerillas, "focos," could act as agents for socialist revolution by creating through their actions alone the conditions that would enable a large-scale mass revolution. Tactical wins and losses, though important, were less so than the mass identification with revolutionary possibility that such actions could create by proving to the dispossessed, according to Debray, "that a soldier and a policeman are no more bulletproof than anyone else" (51). The inevitable losses incurred when a small fighting force encountered a trained army did not necessarily have to be a deterrent to fomenting revolution: "For a revolutionary, failure is a springboard. As a source of theory it is richer than victory: it accumulates experience and knowledge" (23). The implication of Guevara's theory of revolution as read through Regis Debray was that, win or lose, focos could become through exemplary action alone a revolutionary vanguard for a soon-to-follow revolution.

"Armed Propaganda" and the Vanguard of the Revolution

Groups like the Black Panther Party were not only excited by the possibility that a small-scale organization could provoke a broader engagement with governmental forces and elicit a mass response, they were empowered by the seemingly audacious claim that if small, armed groups created the conditions of revolutionary struggle, ultimately *they could win*. In the short film *Black Panther*, Huey Newton explained from prison:

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> We're not a self-defense group in the limited fashion that you usually think of self-defense groups. I like to use the example of when Fidel Castro started the revolution along with Che Guevara. There were only twelve of them altogether. They realized they wouldn't be able to topple the oppressive regime in Cuba. What they were was essentially an educational body. They engaged with the Army. They fought with the Army in order to show the people that the army was not bullet proof. The police were not bullet proof and that Batista's regime was not a regime that was impossible to topple. So the people started to feel their own strength. The Black Panther Party feels very much the same way. We think that this educational process is necessary and it's the people that will cause the revolution. . . . And we plan to teach the people the strategies and necessary tools to liberate themselves.

Newton's belief that military action could have a value beyond basic wins and losses by serving as revolutionary propaganda was drawn primarily from the example of the Cuban revolution. Fidel Castro had affirmed in 1962 at the Second Declaration of Havana: "What Cuba can give to the peoples, and has already given, is its example. And what does the Cuban revolution teach? That revolution is possible, that the people can make it." *The Black Panther* would quote Jose Marti's advice that "the best way of showing is doing," while Huey P. Newton would argue in "The Correct Handling of the Revolution," "When the Vanguard group destroys the machinery of the oppressor by dealing with him in small groups of three and four, and then escapes the might of the oppressor, the masses will be overjoyed and adhere to this correct strategy. When the masses hear that a Gestapo policeman has been executed while sipping coffee, and the revolutionary executioners fled without being traced, the masses will see the validity of this approach to resistance" (*Black Panthers Speak*, 41, 20).

Regis Debray labeled this "armed propaganda" in his highly influential *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, which attempted to continue and elaborate on the work begun in Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare* (47). Debray, who had been arrested in Bolivia during Guevara's Bolivia campaign and served three years in prison as a result, greatly favored, as did Fidel Castro and Che Guevara himself, revolutionary praxis over revolutionary theory. Guevara vigorously denigrated "coffee-shop theories" and "the do-nothing attitude of those pseudo-revolutionaries who procrastinate under the pretext that nothing can be done against a professional army" (*Selected Works*, 204, 375). He urged

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instead, "Where one really learns is in a revolutionary war; every minute teaches you more than a million volumes of books. You mature in the extraordinary university of experience" (386).

The notion of "armed propaganda" suggested that not only could revolutionary war be a learning experience for revolutionaries, it could also be a teaching experience for the masses of people not yet directly involved in the revolution. In his theoretical reworkings of Guevara's writings, Debray would consistently reinforce Castro's theme from *The Second Declaration of Havana* that "the duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution," first in an essay-length account of the Cuban revolution entitled "Castroism: The Long March in Latin America," which initially appeared in 1964 in *Les Temps Modernes* and was later reprinted in the *New Left Review*, and then in *Revolution within the Revolution*. Both texts would offer the revolutions in Cuba and throughout Latin America as blueprints for revolutionary action worldwide. Castro's maxim was made so central by proponents of Guevara-style revolution that even Carlos Marighella would paraphrase it as the reason for revolution in his highly influential 1969 *Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla:* "No matter what your philosophy or personal circumstances, you become a revolutionary only by making revolution" (39).

Though Debray, Castro, and Guevara consistently denigrated action that was social, political, or strategic rather than strictly military in nature, Guevara had also continuously cautioned that all military action had to have symbolic value that could be easily read and understood by the masses of people not yet involved in the revolution: "The people must be shown that social wrongs are not going to be redressed by civil means alone" (*Guerilla Warfare*, 111). For his part, Debray cautioned: "The guerilla struggle . . . must have the support of the masses or disappear; before enlisting them directly, it must convince them that there are valid reasons for its existence so that the 'rebellion' will truly be—by the manner of its recruitment and the origin of its fighters—a 'war of the people'" (*Revolution within the Revolution?* 47). For groups like the Black Panther Party, whose numbers were initially quite small—the initial Oakland chapter numbered not more than five at its inception—the philosophy of Guevara and its investment in symbolic acts of military violence that could be accomplished in small groups to great results held an obvious appeal. Ultimately, however, it would be the Black Panther Party's interventions into the realm of symbolic, rather than military, culture that would have the most lasting effect in helping to define and position post-1965 African American culture

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as hypervisible, radically defiant, and the site of a contradictory empowerment and disempowerment.

Richard Pryor and the Creation of a Revolutionary Cultural Politics

As the Panthers attempted to recreate symbolic culture, they began to have widespread influence on the transformation taking place in African American culture and aesthetics. Richard Pryor, whose work came of age through and with the Black Panther Party, declared in his autobiography, "I knew that I could stir up more shit on stage than in a revolution" (*Pryor Convictions*, 121). Pryor embodied the ways in which the cultural politics of groups like the Black Panther Party were influencing a developing African American popular culture. Before the 1970s, Pryor's routines were largely devoid of the explicit political references and references to African American vernacular culture that he would later make famous. After undergoing a series of personal problems, he relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area, where he came into contact with a number of radically politicized African American artists and intellectuals, including Huey P. Newton.[2] In an atmosphere that he would characterize in his autobiography as "a city of spectacles" and "a circus of exciting, extreme, colorful, militant ideas. Drugs. Hippies. Black Panthers. Antiwar protests. Experimentation. Music, theater, poetry" (115), Pryor had a personal and artistic epiphany: "One night I served as the disc jockey on a radio station, playing Miles and rambling on about Nixon, the Vietnam War, the Black Panthers, and shit. I didn't know anything about that shit. But who better to talk about it?" (118). This sort of saturation in radical culture resulted in a moment of personal transformation in which, according to Pryor, "I had a sense of Richard Pryor the person. I understood myself. I knew what I stood for. I knew what I thought. I knew what I wanted to do" (121).

The Panthers' belief that performative action could serve not only as a heuristic tool but also as a provocation to revolution enabled them to understand a variety of activities beyond military action as revolutionary: "The main purpose of a vanguard group should be to raise the consciousness of the masses through educational programs and certain physical activities that the party will participate in. The sleeping masses must be bombarded with the correct approach to struggle through the activities of the vanguard party. Therefore, the masses must know that the party exists.

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The party must use all means available to get this information across to the masses" (Foner, 43). Pryor's belief that he "could stir up more shit on stage than in a revolution" echoed the ambiguities that were developing in the relationship between revolutionary action and revolutionary representation as espoused by the Black Panther Party, whose emphasis on the heuristic and the performative would end up creating revolution as a highly visible and visual affair rather than a series of covert actions that involved anything from public demonstrations to concerts by their in-house group of musicians ("The Lumpen") and the politicizing of popular performers such as Pryor. In "The Correct Handling of a Revolution," Newton explains the process by which revolutionary action will mirror back to the masses images of themselves in the idealized form of revolutionaries:

> The masses are constantly looking for a guide, a Messiah to liberate them from the hands of the oppressor. The vanguard party must exemplify the characteristics of worthy leadership. Millions and millions of oppressed people might not know members of the vanguard party personally or directly, but they will gain through an indirect acquaintance the proper strategy for liberation via the mass media and the physical activities of the party. It is of prime importance that the vanguard party develop a political organ, such as a newspaper created by the party, as well as employ strategically revolutionary art and the destruction of the oppressor's machinery. For example, Watts. The economy and property of the oppressor was destroyed to such an extent that no matter how the oppressor tried to whitewash the activities of the black brothers, the real nature and real cause of the activity was communicated to every black community. (44)

The Panthers' belief that armed propaganda could provoke people to identify with them as the vanguard party caused them to seek to translate every visual encounter with the Panther ideology into a lived experience of the revolutionary utopian possibilities that ideology presented. In *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution*, the Yippie leader Jerry Rubin would simply declare: "Revolution is theater in the streets. . . . The Panther uniform—beret, black leather jacket, gun—helps create the Panther legend. Three Panthers on the street are an army of thousands" (142). The Panthers thus self-consciously presented individuals and images whose revolutionary representation would provoke the possibility of radical social change by creating an identification between the visual representation and the viewer. The

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Panthers used their iconic uniform and images of Newton as a nexus to trigger identification among people who would never wear such clothing and who would identify experiences such as Newton's incarceration as radically outside the realm of their own lives.

The Black Panther Party's emphasis on lower-class urban vernacular culture as the expression of "authentic" Blackness also validated Richard Pryor's own celebration of the aesthetics of a lower-class, urban African American vernacular. Pryor, who lampooned the very possibility of positive African American images in U.S. popular culture with the creation of the character of Clark Washington, "a mild-mannered custodian for the *Daily Planet*" who is able to transform into "Super Nigger," epitomizes the ambivalent possibilities for critical African American images in the post-segregation United States. On the cover of his self-titled 1968 album *Richard Pryor,* the comedian posed naked, mocking the portrayal of African people in magazines like *National Geographic*. The album, from its cover art to routines like "Super Nigger" and "T.V. Panel Show," provides a thorough critique of the overdetermination of African American representation in U.S. popular culture up to that point.

Pryor brilliantly mimicked the Panthers' popular rhetorical style and the unlikely fame they had found by 1968 through frequent appearances in mainstream American television in "T.V. Panel Show," which takes to absurd extremes the Panthers' ability to interject their ideology into even the most banal of settings:

> Black nationalist: I got something to say, man. You dig? You cats been up here rapping and ain't got nothing to say about the real thing. . . . You cats up here rapping about the Jews but what about me? What about my people?
>
> T.V. Host: I don't believe anybody's said anything about the Jews.
>
> Black nationalist: You will! You will!

The incongruity of the Panthers' message and the daytime talk-show format, and the obvious limitations of that setting are unmasked, and Pryor continues throughout the routine to foreground the Panthers' attention-getting rhetorical style, such as when the Black nationalist on the panel interrupts the other participant's discussion of religion to interject "God was a junkie, baby! He had to be a junkie to put up with all of this. You don't just walk around feeling nothing behind all of this."

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The title of Pryor's popular 1976 album *Bicentennial Nigger* aimed squarely at African Americans' ambivalent position within U.S. symbolic culture and reflects on the status of the African American image in the socially and historically vexed year of the bicentennial celebration of the nation's founding, twelve years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and ten years after the Black Panther Party's first major public action. By the release of the album, African American images were so soundly incorporated into U.S. popular culture that Pryor's album cover could chain together the litany of representational possibilities open to African Americans at this time, including a naked slave, an emphatic minister, a victorious boxer, a Civil War–era soldier, a Tuskegee airman, a Black revolutionary, a frightened sharecropper, a policeman, a funky hipster, and a Black businessman. The immediate readability that the album presupposes for these images testifies to the extent to which Black images had become a commonplace presence in the shifting terrain of dominant representation between the early 1960s and the late 1970s. While Jerry Rubin would declare that "revolution is theater in the streets" (132), the Panthers would attempt to make a revolution of the limitations of African American representation marked by Pryor's work.

After his sojourn in the San Francisco Bay Area, Pryor reappeared on the comedy scene with a radically reworked comedic persona that included references to the cost of the war in Vietnam, civil discontent, and police violence at home for African Americans, and provided, according to Mel Watkins, "a crucial breakthrough in African American stage humor" (544). Unlike many biographers of Pryor, who tend to attribute the pivotal change in his humor either to the realization of an individual genius or to a personal transformation that finally allowed him to locate himself within an authentic African American subjectivity that he had previously masked, Watkins sees the shift in Pryor's emphasis as reflective of a "shift in the African American mood" that allowed Pryor to build a fan base among "those under thirty-five, who were increasingly rejecting the traditional black middle-class tactic of de-emphasizing cultural differences between the races and embracing Black Power" (545). Attributing these changes to "militant new voices—the Black Panthers and Stokely Carmichael among others," Watkins concludes: "Pryor's switch to an outspoken Black voice occurred at precisely the right time" (545).

Within a shifting cultural climate made ripe for change by both the Civil Rights Movement and the popular urban unrest it had failed to contain,

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the Black Panther Party would work, like Richard Pryor, with both popular culture and a popular politics of discontent to challenge the dominant motifs of U.S. culture that spectacularized Black suffering and discontent. But while Pryor was largely content to "stir up more shit on stage than in a revolution" with his challenges to the limited parameters of African American representation, the Black Panther Party would seek to reshape those motifs into a radically aestheticized demand for social change. While Pryor would work through the comic absurdity of Black suffering in routines like "Wino and Junkie" and "Niggers vs. the Police,"[3] the Black Panther Party would push a program of "armed propaganda" aimed at demonstrating the necessity for armed struggle and also to argue for a violent visual and discursive moral persuasion that would move African Americans from a position of victimhood to a position of righteous indignation characterized by Carlos Marighella as the "moral superiority" that "sustains the urban guerilla" (47).

Marighella argued in *The Manual of the Urban Guerilla:* "Where the urban guerilla's weapons are inferior, he gains through moral superiority. In moral superiority the urban guerilla has undeniable superiority. . . . Moral superiority allows the guerilla to attack and survive, and to succeed in his main objective" (47). The Panthers would turn Pryor's tragic/comic cry for the positive recognition of racial difference into an unapologetic cry for self-defense through a moral suasion that relied on intense identification provoked by its performance of vanguardism. Their model of identification was dependent on recreating African American identity around revolutionary action. In her autobiography, Assata Shakur explores her transformation from someone who shared the African American middle-class aspirations of the 1950s to a Black revolutionary throughout the 1960s and 1970s with the declaration: "I love Black people, I don't care what they are doing, but when Black people are struggling, that's when they are most beautiful to me" (189).

Seize the Time! Watts, Armed Self-Defense, and the Death of the Civil Rights Movement in California

For groups like the Black Panther Party, Ernesto "Che" Guevara's dictums, when taken together with the limited success of the Civil Rights Movement and the conditions of widespread social discontent following its failures, social revolution seemed not only possible but inevitable. Amiri

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Baraka notes the way in which the fertile political climate of the 1960s and 1970s had been created by earlier movements. In his account of the birth of the Black Arts Theater, Baraka writes about the way in which the vibrant postwar political culture was reflected in the street culture of Harlem:

> The older black nationalists always talked on their ladders across the street from the Hotel Theresa. Larger forums were held in front of Mr. Michaux's bookstore, called, affectionately, the House of Proper Propaganda. Malcolm had spoken in front of the store often and there was a sign in front of the store ringed by pan-African leaders from everywhere in the black world. (208)[4]

Nowhere did possible social revolution seem more plausible than in the symbolically, culturally, and politically loaded terrain of California. Though unrest would break out in cities across the United States throughout the 1960s, "the Watts Riots" in the Watts section of Los Angeles in August of 1965 would become the emblematic moment of racial unrest to which all other subsequent acts of urban discord would be compared. The uprising in Watts held unprecedented symbolic importance because "Watts clashed with the entire organized white world as a collective organism," as Harold Cruse claimed in 1967 in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (384). For Black radicals like the Panthers, the violence of Watts seemed to be a powerful counterpoint to the symbolic successes of nonviolence as a political and cultural imperative. According to Cruse, "the sobering lessons of the Watts rebellion" enabled a change from a discourse of "self-defense" to a discourse of "guerilla warfare" among Black nationalist groups. This is symbolized in Cruse's argument by the evolving philosophy of revolution espoused by Robert Williams, whose political philosophies as articulated in *Negroes with Guns* (1962) were a major influence on the genesis and evolution of the Black Panther Party (Cruse, 386). Panther cofounder Bobby Seale even went so far as to characterize the party's first major action as "Niggers with Guns in the State Capitol" in *Seize the Time,* his 1968 history of the Black Panther Party (153).[5]

Williams, a local leader in a small chapter of the NAACP in Monroe, North Carolina, came to national prominence in the late 1950s when he began advocating that the organization reevaluate its stance on nonviolence and suggesting that it consider "meet[ing] violence with violence" (*Negroes with Guns,* 26). Like the Deacons for Defense, a group that had armed and organized for "Black self-defense" but ended up primarily pro-

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viding armed protection for civil rights organizers, Williams constantly negotiated between a civil rights–style engagement with American culture and society and a desire to separate completely from American society and culture. This eventually resulted in his censure by the national leaders of the NAACP and exile, first in Cuba, where he befriended Castro and Guevara, and then in China as a guest of Mao Tse Tung.[6]

By 1967, according to Cruse's account, as a direct consequence of the Watts rebellion, Robert Williams began to essentially call for a foco-style revolution by advocating "a new concept of revolution [that] defies military science and tactics. The new concept is lightning campaigns conducted in highly sensitive urban communities with the paralysis reaching the small communities and spreading to the farm areas" (386). For African American radical organizers like Williams, Watts had begun to suggest the limitations of "the good society" of mainstream U.S. social reform and the "beloved community" of civil rights rhetoric. According to Cruse, the contradictions inherent in the embrace of guerilla warfare by the leader of an organization that had been created to defend the pro-integrationist aims of the Civil Rights Movement was typical of the ideological confusion experienced by African American intellectuals in the late 1960s. For poets, playwrights, critics, and cultural workers alike, Watts was a watershed moment that brought the civil rights tradition and its attendant mythology to crisis. For Cruse, Williams's embrace of Watts as providing the impetus for "guerilla warfare" foretold a dangerous trend in a African American radical culture, namely, the tendency to adopt the notion of guerilla warfare without fully exploring or creating the necessary conditions for its eventual success.

In California, the site of several defining moments of the student movement, including the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the long-running student strikes at San Francisco State University, talk of revolution was so much part of the cultural and political discourse by 1968 that further preparation or exploration may have seemed completely unnecessary. Even the student struggles at San Francisco State, which began in late 1967 and required the intercession of then California governor Ronald Reagan and the appointment of two chancellors in as many years, had the symbolic violence of Watts at their core.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) organizer Todd Gitlin would claim of the student strikes at San Francisco State that "they began, as insurrection does in America, with the blacks" (298). Protests by the Black

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Student Union to contest the racist representation in the school's newspaper as well as the suspension of a popular instructor provided the literal but also symbolic impetus for a campuswide shutdown as the Black Student Union formed coalitions with other campus groups, including SDS, the Peace and Freedom Party, and members of the Experimental College. The student strikes grew so large and were so well sustained that Gitlin posited that the "flood might recede, but the countryside will be permanently changed" (298).

Law and Order and Black Power in Conflict

By 1968, California also stood on the brink of transforming its prison system into one of the leading structures of what has come to be characterized as "the prison industrial complex."[7] The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the social unrest that ensued in urban centers throughout the United States brought the confrontation between the dream of a postsegregation culture and its early realities to the forefront of American culture. Nowhere was the conflict between the promises, the actually realizable potential of the Civil Rights Movement, and the intractability of American social and political culture better epitomized than in the clash between radical African American activist culture, which highlighted the police as an "occupying army" and prisons as "modern day slavery," and the culture of "law and order" as pioneered in California by U.S. president Richard Nixon, a former senator from California, and Ronald Reagan, who became governor of California in 1967, just as the Panthers were becoming a powerful force in U.S. public culture.[8] The rhetoric of law and order positioned African Americans firmly within a discourse of lawlessness and disorder that they had traditionally been assigned by the dominant culture. The Black Panther Party would radically reconfigure this discourse, restructuring the relationship between the African American outlaw figure and a romanticized notion of revolution to provoke identificatory possibilities across a broad spectrum of potential supporters. The Black Panther notion of vanguardism successfully created allies out of the formerly uninitiated and apolitical through the wide-ranging appeal of an ideology scripted through an easily decipherable iconic language of images: the raised fist, the black jacket and beret, and the gun.

The industrialization and modernization of California prison technology in conjunction with Nixon's national calls for law and order spawned

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a cultural climate and economic order that not only endorsed but actually required the incarceration of a large number of its citizenry in order to continue to function.[9] As the postwar booms in industrial production that had attracted large numbers of low-wage southern migrants to California began to fade, African Americans, who had made up the bulk of the southern migrants in what has come to be known as the Great Migration, became fodder for a growing prison system.

In 1978, the U.S. senator Edward Kennedy addressed the NAACP in a speech in which he called "the underclass" both "the great unmentioned problem of America today" and "a group in our midst, perhaps more dangerous, more bereft of hope, more difficult to confront, than any for which our history has known" (Lehman, 282). Kennedy's speech typifies the way in which urban African Americans were beginning to be demonized as an impending threat even by those who considered themselves proponents of the Civil Rights Movement. The growth of radical Black political movements in the 1960s and 1970s in California existed in an immediately confrontational relationship to the growth of a prison industry and a law-and-order culture, which was also radical in its ability to transform the culture of California and eventually the United States. The Black Panther Party's valorization of "the brother on the block" as a potential fighting force played into mainstream ideas about the threat that the urban African American underclass presented. However, the Panthers' desire to present themselves as the vanguard of the revolution, whose job it was to heuristically perform revolutionary behavior for a mass audience also incited an intense identification that ultimately cut across class and racial barriers, redefining the spectacle of urban poverty.

The Black Panther Party, the Media, and Military Action

Though the Black Panther Party would become most strongly associated in its early years with its highly publicized actions to patrol the streets of Oakland in order to monitor police brutality, the party mobilized on multiple fronts. Two such examples include its involvement in local electoral politics, and the party's highly touted "survival programs," which featured screening programs for sickle cell anemia, free breakfast programs, and voter registration drives. The cultural war waged through the Black Panther Party's sophisticated understanding of and engagement with mass media and popular culture created a complex interplay between the radi-

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cal culture and mainstream American popular culture that it both courted and was courted by. This relationship was simplified and parodied by Tom Wolfe as "radical chic" in his best-selling *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (1970) and was also harshly critiqued by Maulana Karenga and his US Organization, the Kuumba Collective, and other cultural nationalists.[10] Much of the contemporary misunderstanding of the Black Panther Party's place in American popular culture and its continuing legacy revolves around the thorny questions of representation, appropriation, and commodification raised by its engagement with American popular and political culture and its embrace of vanguardist philosophy as espoused by Che Guevara, Regis Debray, and Fidel Castro.

Though the specific media training of the early members was limited to cofounder Bobby Seale's professional experience as a stand-up comedian, from the very beginning, the Oakland chapter of the Black Panther Party organized around actions meant to have a specific symbolic cachet that could be easily read when transmitted through dominant media. Seale was working in one of the Johnson administration's Poverty Program job-training offices when he and Huey P. Newton conceived of the Black Panther Party and proceeded to draft the Ten-Point Program after hours in the office on 16 October 1966 (Seale, 59).[11] Newton and Seale met while students at Merritt Junior College in Oakland. Both were active in campus organizing initially in the Afro-American Association, a group organized primarily around the study of African American culture, and later in a breakaway group called the Soul Students Advisory Council. The historian Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar notes the influence of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), which was initially organized on college campuses by African American students involved in SDS, on students like Newton and Seale. Ogbar labels the Soul Students Advisory Council "a RAM front organization" (84). "RAM never attracted the media attention of SNCC or the Panthers," Ogbar notes, and Seale writes that he and Newton became disenchanted with what they perceived as the group's inability to translate their radical political vision off campus to the "brothers on the block" (78). From the beginning, the actions of the Oakland Black Panther Party showed a flair for the audacious and dramatic and a connection to everyday culture. On 21 February 1967, the first real year of action for the fledgling Black Panther Party, the group organized a security detail for the highly publicized visit of Betty Shabazz, the widow of Malcolm X, to the San Francisco Bay Area. The group caught the eye of the Bay Area radical community,

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including the future high-profile Panther party member Eldridge Cleaver, who would remember as formative to his political education the moment when the Panthers' security detail clashed with police over their refusal to disarm, citing their constitutional right to bear arms (*Post-Prison Writings and Speeches*, 23). A couple of months later, on 27 April 1967, the Panthers released the first crude issue of *Black Panther Community News*, which focused on community outrage over the police murder of an unarmed Black teenager named Denzil Dowell during an alleged arrest attempt in nearby Richmond, California.[12]

Less than a month later, on 2 May 1967, party members garnered national attention when they arrived fully armed on the steps of the state capitol in Sacramento, temporarily diverting media attention from a planned meeting on the capitol grounds between Governor Ronald Reagan and youth groups to Bobby Seale, who read "In Defense of Self-Defense: Executive Mandate Number One," a piece written by Newton in support of the right to bear arms (Seale, 153–55). Because of the strategic and sensational staging and the presence of the media for the youth event, this moment began to form the party's national media profile as not only "armed and extremely dangerous" but also a political force to be reckoned with even though the group was still relatively small at this point. By 29 June 1967, it had consolidated its image as an organization deserving of a national platform—so much so that it was able to name Stokely Carmichael as the "Field Marshall of the Black Panther Party" (Charles E. Jones, 53). Carmichael had been chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), one of the most high-profile and radical groups of the coalition of groups that constituted the Civil Rights Movement, when in 1966 it decided to expel its white members in a move to redefine itself as a Black Power group. Highly charismatic, Carmichael was so renowned for his propensity to manipulate media attention that he was nicknamed "Stokely Starmichael" in radical circles.

The Black Panther Party's major action of 1967, which was not strictly tied to the creation of images of militancy and potential power for the group but also had a military component, was the creation of the party's Community Police Patrols, in which armed groups of Panthers patrolled the streets of Oakland in order to provide protection for ordinary citizens against the threat of police violence during traffic stops and arrests.[13] But even these patrols were intended more as guerilla theater than guerilla action, because the confrontation between the Panthers and the police was

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meant to instruct those who witnessed the confrontations that the police were not above reproach. In the film *Black Panther,* Eldridge Cleaver offers an explanation of why confrontations with the police became the Black Panther Party's primary performative moment for the symbolic staging of their ideology:

> You don't find a guy just remaining the same after really seeing the Panthers. The guys on the block out there, they have never been too impressed by America, by what's been happening. They're not too impressed by that. But they're going to stand there in fear of the cops. This is one of the reasons the Black Panther Party focused on the cops, because the cops are out there and visible. This is the direct contact that Black people have with the white power structure, when the Man, the Pig comes down and bothers them. Here comes two niggers with some guns who step out and talk to the cops just the way they've been talked to. People notice that.

The film, which was created to showcase the Panther platform, established the party's other key visual signifiers by cutting directly from Cleaver's explanation of why the group chose confrontation with the police as their primary performative moment to images of uniformed Panther men and women marching in formation, fists upraised, groups of Panther women chanting the party's slogans, and party members lining the steps of the Alameda courthouse. This visual imagery would become as widely associated with the party as the police patrols because it so successfully translated the Black Panther critique of the justice system in the United States into an easily accessible, visual, symbolic language that still circulates with relevance today, even to those who no longer have access to the party's original Ten-Point Platform.

Free Huey! Mobilizing the Image for Social Change

The arrest of Huey P. Newton on 28 October 1967 inadvertently provided the pivotal symbolic moment around which Panther critique and organizing would focus for the next three years, for Newton's image would be deployed to consolidate support for the notion that unjust police repression justified the necessity for revolution.[14] Newton and Glenn McKinney were driving home from a party late at night in Oakland when their car was stopped by a police cruiser. A firefight broke out: it left Newton critically

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injured, one police officer dead, and a second injured. Newton was later arrested and charged with a number of felonies, including attempted murder. For the Panthers, Newton's trial would provide the perfect performative moment to stage their dissent. Elaine Brown would write of 1967: "It was the year 'Free Huey' erupted as a kind of universal battle cry that J. Edgar Hoover openly pronounced: 'The Black Panther Party is the single greatest threat to the internal security of the United States'. . . . Huey Newton had become more than just another leader of a black organization. He was the symbol of change for Americans questioning everything sacred to the American way of life" (237). The "Free Huey" campaign would provide not only the organizing opportunity for the coalescence of an international movement, making the Panthers objects of admiration for radicals around the world, but it would also allow the relationship between theatrical militancy and radical dissent that had been inherent in the Panthers from the beginning to emerge. Through the movement to free him from incarceration, Newton's image would become synonymous with radical dissent and vanguardist leadership.

In December 1967, the Panthers, in a coalition with the Peace and Freedom Party, an antiwar group based in Berkeley, coined the slogan "Free Huey," which would become an international rallying cry for the campaign of the same name. The group chose 17 February, Newton's birthday, to stage a large rally as a precursor to demonstrations at the trial (Seale, 208–10). Several thousand people gathered to listen to prominent members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Panthers, including Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, James Foreman, and Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver. In keeping with the vanguardist philosophy of the Panthers, they both spoke about the particulars of Newton's case and used Newton as a vector for understanding the situation of African Americans in general. Stokely Carmichael reminded the crowd: "We're here to celebrate brother Huey P. Newton's birthday. We're not here to celebrate it as Huey Newton the individual, but as Huey Newton parcel of black people wherever we are on the world today. . . . And so, in talking about brother Huey Newton tonight, we have to talk about the struggle of black people, not only in the United States, but in the *world* today" ("Free Huey Rally Speech"). Standing under large photographs of Newton, Carmichael continued to insist on the heuristic value of Newton's experience of incarceration, which he collapsed into the experience of Black people in general by claiming: "We must develop an undying love as is personified in brother

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Huey P. Newton. Undying love for our people. If we do not do that then we will be wiped out." For Carmichael, Newton personified Guevara's demand that "the guerilla fighter as a social reformer should not only provide an example in his own life but he ought also constantly to give orientation in ideological problems" (34). As Huey P. Newton's image became the nexus for vanguardist identification, the Black Panther Party quickly became the spectacle through which the experience of revolution could be translated into what the party would label the "brother on the block" or "the lumpen proletariat."[15]

The austere setting of the rally, which resembled a political meeting more than a birthday party, provided a stark contrast to the explosive rhetoric and animated theatrics of the speakers, many of whom were renowned for their ability to stir crowds in the best tradition of African American oratory. H. Rap Brown asked the crowd: "How many white folks you kill today?" reminding them: "You are revolutionaries! Che Guevara says they only two ways to leave the battlefield: victorious or dead. Huey's in jail! That's no victory" ("Free Huey Rally Speech"). Carmichael reiterated the relationship between policing and state control: "They make us fight; they make us steal; they judge us; they put us in prison; they parole us; they send us out; they pick us up again. Where, in God's name, do we exercise any sense of dignity in this country?" ("Free Huey Rally Speech").

The speakers' invocation of the struggle of Huey P. Newton against the police and justice system was in keeping with Che Guevara's dictum in *Guerilla Warfare:* "The people must be shown that social wrongs are not going to be redressed by civil means alone" (111). Brown and Carmichael hoped to use the incarceration of Newton to incite revolution against what they saw as a growing police state. Newton's image would become an iconic shorthand that translated his personal struggles with the police, the court system, and his lengthy incarceration into a treatise on Panther ideology. Organizers of the event hoped to transform the "talk about law and order" into talk about "justice in America," as Carmichael urged, and also to transform discourse about revolution into actual revolution by provoking an increase in Black Panther Party membership as an initial means of securing the "progressive radicalization" that Guevara spoke of as a necessary step toward revolution (81). Earl Anthony, who was only the eighth person to join the party, claims that at the time of the Free Huey Rally, "there were still, actually, only about thirty hardcore members; the Free Huey Campaign would be the ticket to flood the membership rolls" (*Spit-*

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ting in the Wind, 43). Between Newton's arrest and trial, membership in the Black Panther Party mushroomed so much that when the actual trial began on 15 July, more than 450 Black Panther Party members were present and over 5,000 spectators ringed the Alameda County Courthouse in what was to become a daily, ritualized display of chants, marches, singing, speeches, and slogans throughout the length of the trial.

Culture as Conduit of Revolutionary Change

When images of the courthouse reached the world via the televisual newsmedia, print media, and alternative journalism, the Black Panther Party successfully transformed the courthouse from its representative role as a vehicle for state power into a theater for the display of a spectacular blackness that was potent in its presentation and seemingly potentially revolutionary in its consequences. The moment the Panthers triumphantly transformed the courthouse into a site for contestation of law-and-order ideology in image culture would become emblematic for the successes of the Black Panther Party, whose biggest victories would largely continue in the terrain of the symbolic through a transformation of image culture in relation to notions of race, power, and potential in the United States.

The conflict between the group's stated goal to become a potential vehicle for "self-defense" and military action along the lines of *Guerilla Warfare*, and the more political or social-reform agendas inherent in its decision to organize as a political "party" with political education goals was present from the start. This tension is apparent even in the potentially contradictory name the group almost gave itself: "The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense." The conflict between those who saw the group as a possible vehicle for radical military intervention and those who saw it as a vehicle for political education, and, therefore, a more potentially social reformist platform, would be a constant and growing problem as the years brought ever increasing levels of governmental and police repression.

The Black Panther Party would successfully, spectacularly appropriate U.S. image culture to their own advantage when they managed to literally "Free Huey" from prison when all charges against him were dropped on 5 August 1970. But had they achieved what Che Guevara outlined as "the essence of guerilla warfare," "the miracle by which a small nucleus of men—looking beyond their immediate tactical objective—becomes the vanguard of a mass movement, achieving its ideals, establishing a new society, end-

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ing the ways of the old, and winning social justice" (*Guerilla Warfare*, 114)? At the Free Huey Rally, Stokely Carmichael stressed to the audience that revolution would only be possible through "organizing our people and orienting them towards an African ideology which speaks to our blackness," but the exact relationship between armed struggle and the struggle for a liberated African American radical culture was never clearly articulated by Guevara, Debray, Castro, or the Panthers themselves. They would repeatedly decry those whom they labeled "cultural nationalists," mostly notably the US Organization, a Los Angeles–based group led by Maulana Karenga.

The rivalry between the Panthers and US would eventually lead to an armed confrontation over the direction of the Black studies program on the campus of UCLA on 17 January 1967. During this confrontation, John Huggins and Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, important leaders in the Southern California chapter of the Black Panther Party, were killed.[16] Scholars such as Ward Churchill, Jim Vander Wall, and Kenneth O'Reilly, as well as Panther accounts of the period, have documented how the conflict between the Panthers and the US Organization was targeted and inflamed by the FBI under COINTELPRO, but with or without FBI interference, a lack of clarity over the role that the cultural struggle would play in the armed struggle was all too real for the Panthers.[17] Newton would repeatedly contrast what he labeled "cultural nationalism" or "pork chop nationalism" with "revolutionary nationalists," which included the Black Panther Party. According to him, cultural nationalists "feel the African culture will automatically bring political freedom," which could potentially lead to political leaders who "oppress the people but . . . promote the African culture"; in contrast, he continued, the Panthers "believe that culture itself will not liberate us. We're going to need some stronger stuff" ("Correct Handling," 50). For the Black Panther Party, the "stronger stuff" was the promotion of an armed struggle through the creation of a dynamic image culture. Ironically, the Panther image culture proved to be such a powerful complement to the party's vanguardist politics that its images would eventually eclipse the party's actual political presence.

Feelings of ambiguity with regard to gains made in the cultural realm were exacerbated by the Panthers' relative success in that realm versus their relative failure to convert those gains into genuine gains in a popular armed struggle. This became especially problematic as violence around the Panthers intensified after the inception of the "Free Huey" campaign in 1967. According to Russell Shoats, "The Panthers were a potentially strong

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Black fighting formation that was forced to take to the field before they were ready [because they chose a] high-profile operation, characteristic of the Civil Rights Movement, that relied heavily on television, radio, and print media" (5,7). Consequently, Shoats says, the Panthers floundered "as groups tried to combine the activities of the political and military workers in one cadre" (5).

To view the Panthers' high level of engagement with popular media culture simply as a strategic mistake that preceded immense military and political failures, as Shoats does, not only paints a limited portrait of the Panthers' contribution to U.S. society and culture but also puts unnecessary limitations on what constitutes political and cultural change. The Black Panther Party evinced a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between African Americans and American popular culture and the centrality of visual culture to African American cultural life than they were or are often given credit for. Examinations of the Black Panther Party legacy continue to be guided by misunderstandings of the central role of cultural work in the Panther struggle, and the Panthers are frequently painted as the victims, unwilling dupes, or scheming manipulators of American media culture. From their first appearance on the front page of the *New York Times* in a photograph showing several Panthers brandishing firearms at the California Statehouse and the inception of the party's official newspaper, the Black Panther Party created an especially sophisticated relationship to broadcast and print media that acknowledged the incipient possibilities for disruption existing in a burgeoning mainstream visual media culture. By doing so, they were able to create a canon of images, slogans, and gestures that codified these symbols into an iconic language of revolution.

The Black migration into northern urban centers paralleled the movement of Black images into mainstream visual culture via television culture; Melvin Patrick Ely has characterized African American presence in postwar television culture as "the Great Black Migration into America's living room" (64). The Panthers were successful in seizing television culture, one of the most important arbiters of public opinion during the Civil Rights Movement and early postsegregation era, and were unquestionably more successful than Karenga and the US Organization or any other organization of the era in manipulating the cultural order against Nixon's notion of law and order.

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The Civil Rights Movement's ideology of nonviolence held an obvious appeal for most Americans, but from the onset of the "Free Huey" campaign, the Black Panther Party successfully conveyed the notion that armed struggle was not only justifiable for African Americans but, in fact, mandated by the treatment of African Americans in the United States. In a certain sense, they were successful precisely because they utilized both the romance and the threat of violence endemic to constructions of Blackness in the United States to win support for their cultural war against the notion of law-and-order culture, even though they could never really fulfill either the role of romantic revolutionary or violent impending threat. Their tremendous success in seeming to convince popular culture of the necessity of a mandate against law-and-order culture would be mocked by those who insisted on downplaying gains made by the party in the cultural realm: thus, party members were dubbed "media star revolutionaries," and much focus was placed on the party's inability or unwillingness to be seen as simply fulfilling the role of revolutionary hero or being a dangerous threat.

The Panther Look A Visual Language for Social Change

In "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, Nostalgia," Angela Davis herself writes of the manner in which the current circulation of images associated with her political work from the 1960s and 1970s often occurs without reference to its origins in Black radical politics. After an encounter with a young man who directly identifies her with the Afro hairstyle that she wore throughout the 1960s, Davis ruminates, "It is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo. It is humiliating because it reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion; it is humbling because such encounters with a younger generation demonstrate the fragility and mutability of historical images, especially those associated with African American history" (29). Davis is most deeply disturbed when reconstructed images from her time as a fugitive appear along with images of Che Guevara in a fashion spread of a popular music magazine, "emptied of all content so that it can serve as a commodified backdrop for advertising." For Davis, the mutability of such images is a particular problem because it allows for the specific details of African American radical histo-

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ricity to be unfixed in such a way that lays it open for a troubling nostalgia. This nostalgia offers a romantic vision of the past that is in the end highly commodifiable.

For Davis's account, the commodification of social movements is a contemporary phenomenon associated with a commodified nostalgia that exists in the place of what might be a more genuine historical memory. According to Davis, the recirculation of the images from the 1960s and 1970s radical culture testifies to the strength of those images to continue to speak in myriad ways to audiences removed from the direct political reality that they portray, but she insists on maintaining a strict boundary between commodification and politicization that risks perpetuating a nostalgia of its own for a political era free of the trivialization and commodification of the raw material of historicity by market forces. This nostalgia for an era "back in the day when everyone was Black and conscious / Freedom was at hand and you could just taste it," as a contemporary song puts it,[18] ignores the ways in which contemporary nostalgia was in fact created and enabled by the visual politics of vanguardism that dominated the radical culture of the time.

Black radical culture of the 1960s and 1970s would continually seek out and define the symbolic language and visual tools that could convey the potential for social and political revolution to African Americans who had grown used enough to oppression to incorporate it into even the everyday language of humor as Richard Pryor had done. The transformation of the symbolic artifacts of everyday culture into potent political symbols was perhaps achieved most consistently by the Black Panther Party, but Angela Davis's Afro spoke as powerfully as their leather jackets and raised fists of the climate of repression and disappointment during the early postsegregation period. Taken together, these symbols created an iconography whose power lay much more in its translatability to commodity culture than in its distance from it.

A vision of the 1960s and 1970s radical culture as one of pure politics free from commodification fails to recognize the complicated role the Black Panther Party played in perpetuating their own mystique throughout commodity culture. Angela Davis's Afro, with which she is now so deeply identified and to which she so greatly regrets being reduced, was cultivated as much for its dramatic performative ability to speak a reductive symbolic political language in a vanguardist manner as "the Panther look." Far from being simple media opportunists, many of the Panthers saw the

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wide dissemination of their example across U.S. culture as the radical mandate of a vanguard party to model revolutionary behavior. Huey Newton, who seemed to understand the Black Panther Party's primary role as that of educating through symbolic action rather than leading an actual armed insurrection, made it clear in his writings that he believed symbolic action could provide instruction that far outlasted both the action and the teacher.

In "The Correct Handling of the Revolution," Newton emphasized the importance of creating moments of dynamic performative action that would then create the visual symbols that would become shorthand instructions for other revolutionary actions: "The brothers in East Oakland learned from Watts a means of resistance. . . . The first man who threw a Molotov cocktail is not personally known by the masses, but yet the action was respected and followed by the people. If the activities of the Party are respected by the people, the people will follow the example. This is the primary job of the Party" (41). At no time, however, did Newton or the Black Panther Party in general limit their notion of "action" to military action in the streets. While Newton and the party's minister of culture Emory Douglas, a skilled illustrator, placed particular emphasis on the creation and circulation of nontextual visual representations of the Black Panther Party, there were other equally significant nonvisual articulations of it. These ranged from Panther songs and slogans from Elaine Brown's album dedicated to the party, to the chants and slogans created for demonstrations such as "Black is Beautiful / Free Huey!" and "No more brothers in jail / The Pigs are gonna catch hell," which successfully imprinted the party ideology onto American popular culture.

One of the most consistently circulated articulations of the Black Panther Party ideology, however, was the party's official newspaper, the *Black Panther*. In his memoir *This Side of Glory*, David Hilliard records how the paper's prominence quickly grew after Emory Douglas, a skilled graphic artist and illustrator, joined the party: "In a short time, the paper becomes the most visible, most constant symbol of the Party, its front page a familiar sight at every demonstration and in every storefront-window organizing project throughout the country" (149).[19] The paper's circulation eventually grew so large, Hilliard records, that it would at times become the primary source of income for the Oakland chapter of the party (154).

Serving both to provide information and to promote the party, the *Black Panther* combined graphic images of police brutality and urban black mis-

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ery with uplifting illustrations and textual analysis of events in American popular and political culture. In the 19 June 1971 issue are found an article on the lack of scientific research on sickle cell anemia; a lengthy analysis of the film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song!* that includes movie stills alongside illustrations by Douglas; a press statement on the Richmond Five; and an article on and picture of Jo Etha Collier, a young Black woman killed while celebrating her graduation from the white high school in Drew, Mississippi, that she had integrated. The careful mélange of popular and political culture in the *Black Panther* suggests how the party would successfully operate within popular culture to create an enduring critique of U.S. culture in general. At the same time, this mix also suggests how the Black Panther Party's investment in popular culture would leave it open to co-option and appropriation by the same commodity forces driving the popular culture that it critiqued.

Material from the early days of the Oakland chapter of the Black Panther Party, now archived in the Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Collection held in Palo Alto by Stanford University, suggests the seemingly limitless extent of the creative nature of its engagement with American popular culture. Whereas Panther efforts to imprint the notion of Black Power and an end to police brutality through the newspaper and rallies is widely known, the extent and sophistication of their engagement with popular culture is not.

In *This Side of Glory,* Hilliard makes brief mention of "large contributions" and "remunerative book deals" as important sources of income for the Black Panther Party (154). The extent of its financial dealings and the sophistication of its interaction with popular culture, however, is not generally acknowledged or explored in the numerous Panther autobiographies and writings about the party. The control of the lucrative book contracts of the prison activist George Jackson, who was seen as a movement martyr; the creation of films to document the Panther struggle and prominent members of the party; and plans for the creation of an Eldridge Cleaver watch dispel myths that members of the Black Panther Party were unaware, unwitting pawns in their interaction with the American culture industry. The name of the entity created to oversee the economic interests of the party demonstrates that the Panthers fully understood the ambiguous nature of such ventures. Elaine Brown notes that Huey P. Newton created "Stronghold Incorporated" as "a one-word idea that captured what the Party intended to erect inside the walls of the citadel of capitalism" (244).

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